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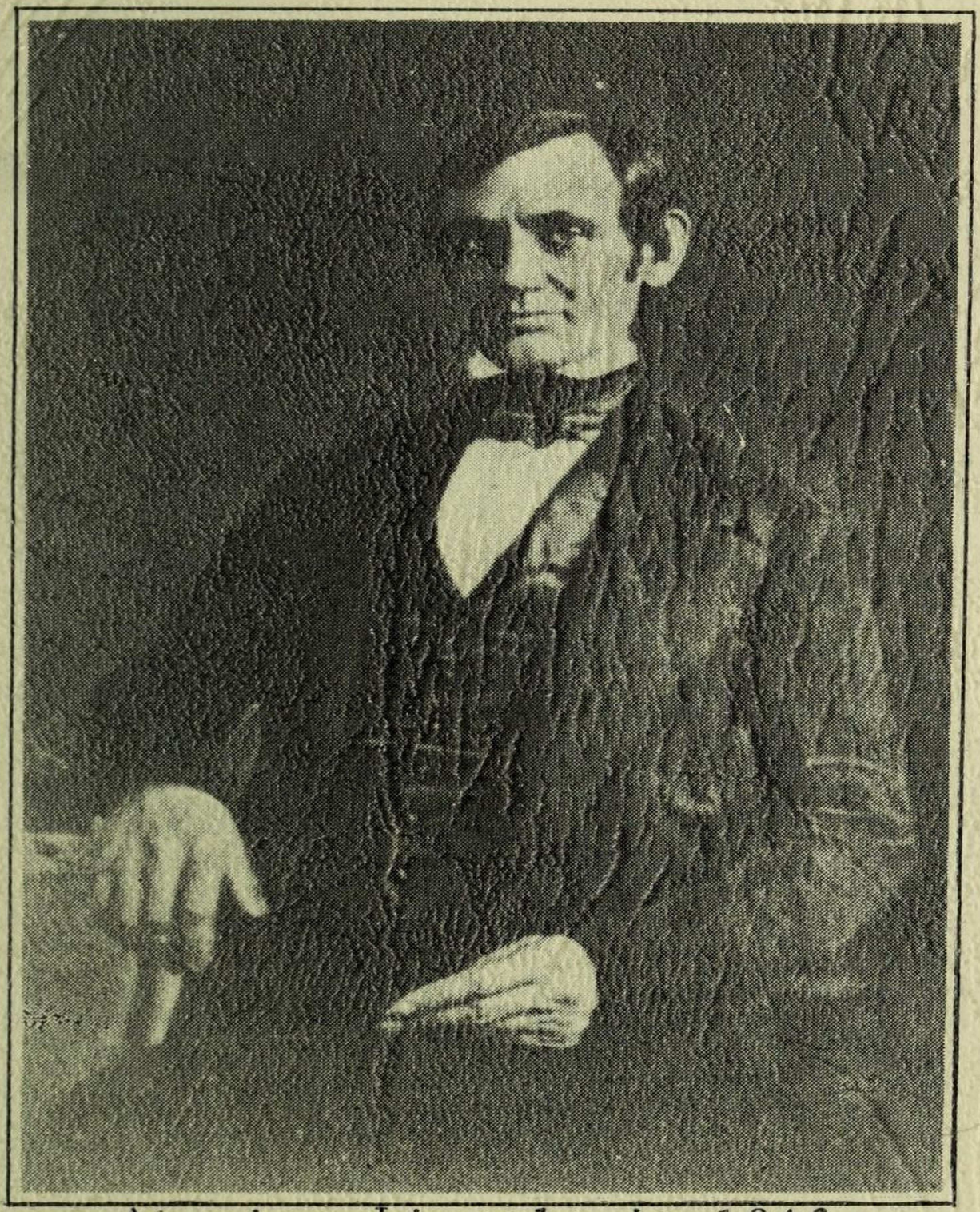


Abraham Lincoln in 1846.

Sarah Bush Lincoln,

THE MOTHER WHO SURVIVED HIM

By

Charles H. Coleman

Eastern Illinois State College

Abraham Lincoln's stepmother, Sarah Bush Lincoln, helped him along the road to greatness. Her warm heart nourished and sustained him, and her really good mind understood and protected his determined groping for knowledge during eleven formative years: from his eleventh year until he reached manhood.

Sarah Bush's family in Hardin County, Kentucky, was Colonial Dutch, the descendants of settlers at New Amsterdam.[1] They were prosperous and well regarded in Elizabethtown, Kentucky. At one time her father, Christopher Bush, owned over two thousand acres of land. Sarah had six brothers and two sisters, and must have had a comfortable and happy home life until her marriage to Daniel Johnston at the age of seventeen in March, 1806.

Among the friends of the Bush family was Thomas Lincoln, nearly eleven years older than Sarah. The story has been told that Thomas courted Sarah, but that he dropped out of the race when she apparently preferred Johnston. Thomas was away from Elizabethtown on a boat trip to New Orleans with her brother Isaac at the time of her marriage. Whether Thomas courted Sarah before her marriage is doubtful, but we do know that he gave her a wedding present and that a

month after his return he married Nancy Hanks, an E-town girl nearer his own age. If broken, Tom's heart was soon mended.

If Sarah Bush had a choice, she picked the wrong man. Daniel Johnston was a poor provider, a man of little standing in the E-town community. His wife's brothers had to pay his debts on at least three occasions. The best job he ever held was that of courthouse jailer and janitor, and he only held that during the two years preceding his death in 1816. When he died leaving three children: Sarah Elizabeth, aged 8, John Davis, 6, and Matilda, 5, his estate was so small that his administrator was required to post only a bond of $100. An E-town storekeeper jotted on Daniel Johnston's account the revealing observation: "an empty vessel makes the most noise". After his death, Sarah bought a lot in E-town with a cabin on it for $25, and settled down to make a home and a life for her three children.

Thomas Lincoln lost his first wife, Nancy Hanks, the mother of his two children Abraham and Sarah, from the "milk sick" in October 1818. They had been living in the Pigeon Creek settlement of Spencer County, Indiana. They had come from Kentucky to this neighborhood in December 1816.

In pioneer days it was the practice for

widows and widowers to remarry promptly. A pioneer family needed a man to protect them and a woman to keep the family together. So Thomas' children, Sarah, aged twelve, and Abraham, aged ten, probably waited with curiosity rather than regret, the return of their father when he went to E-town to marry and bring home to Pigeon Creek their new stepmother and her three children.

Sarah Bush Johnston was nearly 31 years old and Thomas Lincoln was 41 when the Reverend George L. Rogers, Methodist minister, married them on December 2, 1819. The marriage bond was signed by Sarah's younger brother, Christopher. She packed the good pieces of furniture she owned, including a fine walnut bureau which had cost $40, and which probably came from the Bush home, and the stock of clothing owned by the family in a four-horse wagon which had been borrowed by Thomas; and they made the trip back to Pigeon Creek. At the time of her marriage she was a tall, strong woman, with pink cheeks, steady gray-blue eyes, and a very kindly expression.

Sarah was a good mother to all her children. Her Dutch orderliness soon brought comfort and cleanliness to the cabin which had lacked a woman's hand for over a year. She established a way of living that gave

Abraham the time to pursue his studies when his chores were done. Sarah soon recognized that young Abraham was a cut above the other children. He, alone of the five, found books interesting. He walked miles to borrow them; and he showed an early talent for speaking — for clear statement of fact. He was a thoughtful and meditative youngster: he had the ability to reduce problems to their simplest terms. And his stepmother encouraged him, even though she could neither read nor write herself. What is more, she influenced her husband to take the same attitude towards Abraham's "book larnin'"— even to the point of doing Abraham's chores for him when he was engrossed in a book. After Abraham Lincoln's death, Mrs. Sarah Lincoln told William H. Herndon, Lincoln's law partner and biographer, that Thomas Lincoln, feeling the lack of his own education, encouraged Abraham to learn. "As a usual thing", she said, "Mr. Lincoln never made Abe quit reading to do anything if he could avoid it. He would do it himself first."[2]

Both Sarah Lincoln and Abraham in later years spoke of their affectionate and understanding relationship. Abraham Lincoln in 1861 told Augustus H. Chapman of Charleston (who married Sarah's granddaughter Harriet Hanks) that she had always encour-

aged him in his studies and declared that, "she had been his best friend in this world and that no son could love a mother more than he loved her."[3] Sarah told Herndon in 1865 that "Abe was a good boy, and I can say what scarcely one woman, and mother can say in a thousand . . . . Abe never gave me a cross word or look and never refused in fact, or even in appearance, to do anything I requested him. I never gave him a cross word in all my life . . . . His mind and mine, what little I had, seemed to run together — move in the same channel."[4]

Abraham Lincoln's Pigeon Creek home was humble, but there was affectionate family life, mutual trust, and consideration. At every meal Thomas asked this blessing: "Fit and prepare us for humble service. We beg for Christ' sake, Amen".[5] It is difficult to see how Abraham Lincoln's later career could have materialized had he not had this bedrock of congenial and sympathetic life as a boy. As one writer put it: Abraham Lincoln was "step-mothered to greatness".[6] Sarah Lincoln, more than any other one person who influenced Abraham Lincoln's youth, deserves the thanks of a nation.

When Abraham reached his twenty-first birthday, Thomas decided to move to Illinois. Abraham's sister Sarah had died in child-

birth two years before following her marriage to Aaron Grigsby. There was a recurrence of the "milk-sick" in the neighborhood which was killing cattle and humans. Thomas had heard tales of the fertile Illinois land. So he tried Macon County in Illinois for a year, but malaria and the terrible winter of the "deep snow" (1830-1831) discouraged him. In May 1831, the Thomas Lincoln family was on its way back to Indiana when friends persuaded them to try Coles County for a while. Hannah Radley, sister of Sarah Lincoln, lived here.

Abraham Lincoln was no longer living with his parents in 1831. He was twenty-two years old, and had started to work out his own destiny — first at New Salem (to 1837) and then at Springfield. He never lived in Coles County, but he visited his folks there many times, the first time in July 1831 and the last time in January 1861.

Mrs. Lincoln was nearly forty-three years old when she first came to Coles County, and she was nearly fifty-two when she and her husband moved in 1840 to their fifth Coles County home at Goosenest Prairie — now the Lincoln Log Cabin State Park. There she lived for twenty-nine years, dying there in her eighty-first year in 1869.

Harriet Hanks Chapman, a granddaughter,

has given us a description of the Sarah Lincoln of Coles County. Mrs. Chapman (the daughter of Sarah Elizabeth Johnston Hanks and Dennis Hanks) was fourteen years old in 1840. In 1865 she told Herndon that Mrs. Lincoln was "a very tall woman, straight as an Indian, of fair complexion, and was — when I first remember her — very handsome, sprightly, talkative, and proud. She wore her hair curled till gray, is kindhearted and very charitable, and also very industrious."[7]

Abraham's visits to his folks at Goosenest Prairie were most numerous during the 1840's when he was an active circuit riding lawyer and attended court at Charleston, the Coles County seat, once or twice a year. On most of these court visits he took the time to visit his father and stepmother. Often he would hire a buggy for the trip. We may picture him on the seven-mile drive to his father's cabin, the floor at his feet piled with gifts: a sack of flour, a bag of sugar, a bag of coffee beans, perhaps a ham or side of bacon (for Thomas probably had no smoke house), and a few bags of rock candy for the children of John D. Johnston, his stepbrother, who with his family lived with Thomas and Sarah. It will not stretch the imagination to include a bolt of calico for Sarah and perhaps a bright shawl or "comforter" for the old lady.

What happiness for Sarah to have this man take time out of his busy life to come to see her! With his respect for her intelligence, he may have talked over some of his problems with her.

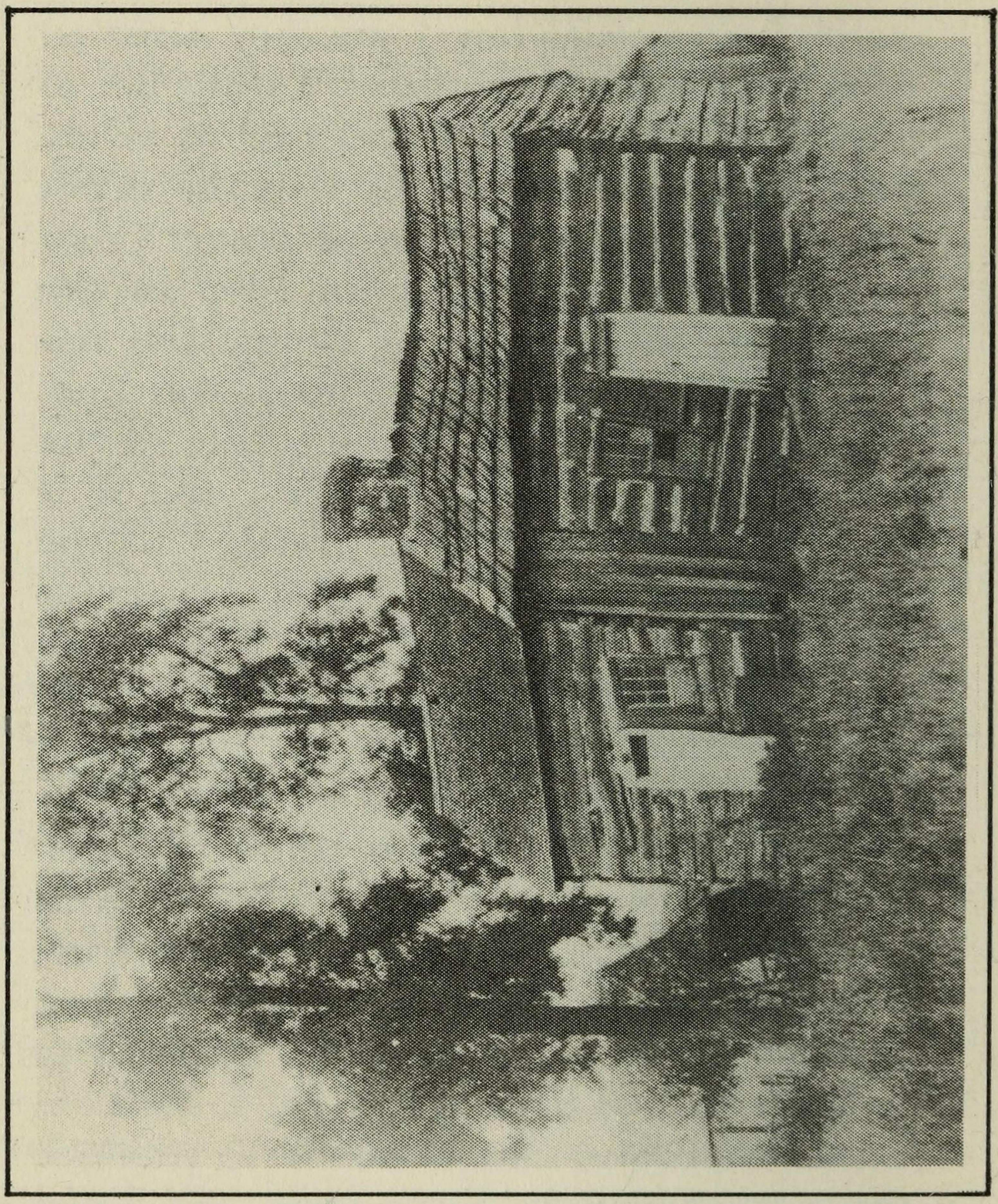
Throughout his life in Springfield and Washington, Abraham Lincoln kept the welfare of Sarah in mind, and made frequent provisions for her comfort. While his father was living, Abraham's financial assistance was not needed very often. Thomas Lincoln, though not wealthy, was a responsible citizen and a hard worker. In 1840 Abraham gave his folks $200 for forty acres of their farm, primarily to keep it out of the hands of his indolent stepbrother, John D. Johnston, and to insure that they would always have a home. Thomas and Sarah retained a life interest in the use of the property. After the death of Thomas in 1851, Abraham refused to sell this "Abraham forty" (as it is known today) and to give part of the sale price to Johnston. His letter, dated November 25, 1851, to his stepbrother gives us an understanding of his attitude toward his stepmother:

Dear Brother:

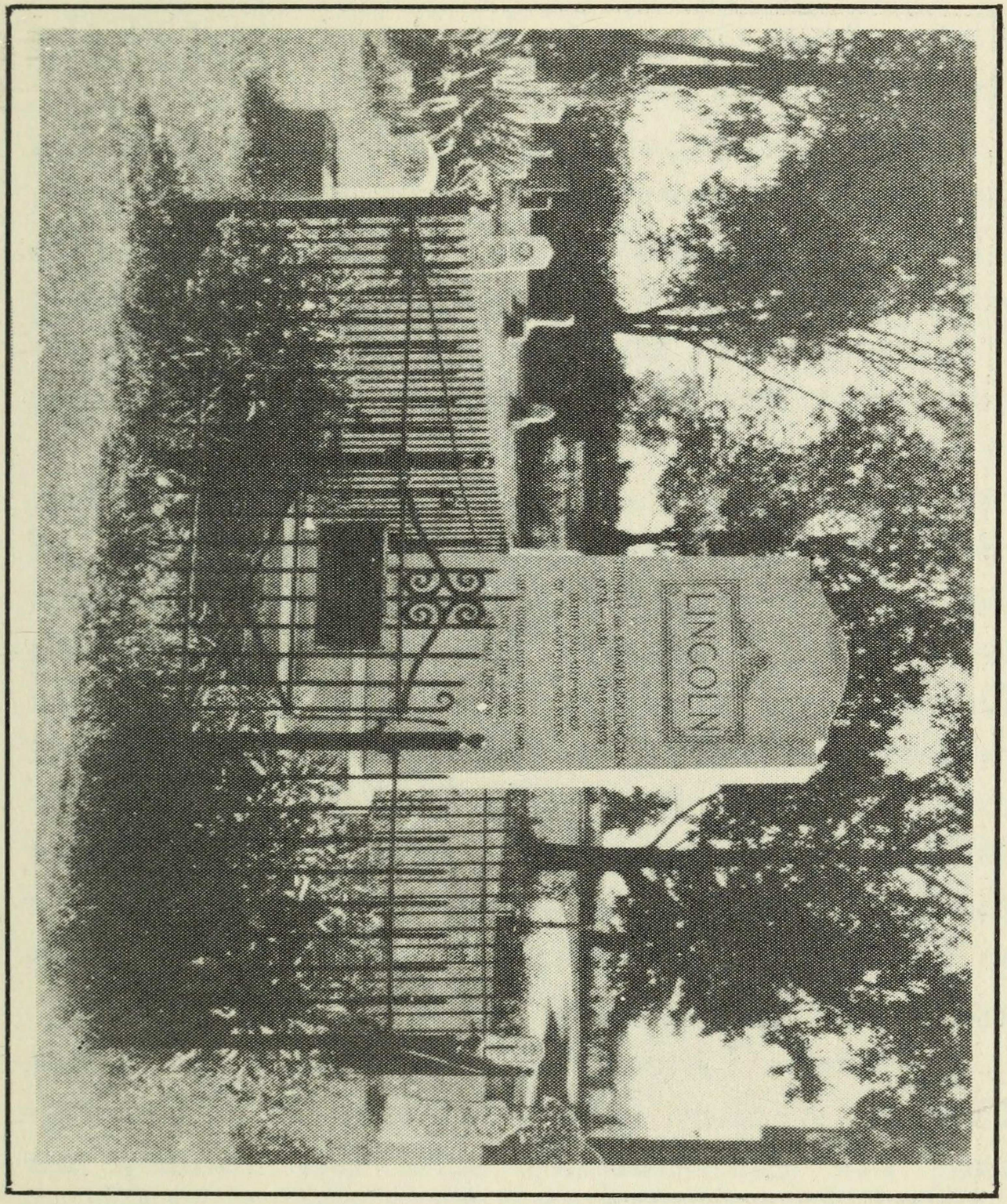
Your letter of the 22nd is just received. Your proposal about selling the east forty acres of land is all that I want or could

claim for *myself;* but I am not satisfied with it on *mother's* account. I want her to have her living, and I feel that it is my duty, to some extent to see that she is not wronged. She had a right of dower (that is, the use of one-third for life) in the other two forties; but, it seems, she has already let you take that, hook and line. She now has the use of the whole of the east forty as long as she lives; and if it be sold, of course she is entitled to the interest on *all* the money it brings as long as she lives; but you propose to sell it for three hundred dollars, take one hundred away with you, and leave her two hundred dollars at 8 per cent, making her the *enormous* sum of 16 dollars a year. Now, if you are satisfied with treating her that way, I am not. It is true, that you are to have that forty for two hundred dollars, *at* mother's death; but you are not to have it *before*. I am confident that land can be made to produce for mother at least $30 a year, and I can not, to oblige any living person, consent that she shall be put on an allowance of sixteen dollars a year.[8]

Actually the forty acres were never sold by Abraham. The land eventually went to Mrs. Lincoln's grandson, John Johnston Hall,



The original Goosenest Prairie cabin of Thomas and Sarah Lincoln. Moved to Chicago in 1892.



Present monument over the graves of Thomas and Sarah Lincoln. Erected in 1924 by the Lions Clubs of Illinois.

with whom she made her home most of the time until her death in 1869.

After his father's death Abraham sent his stepmother money at frequent intervals. There is a tradition in the Sawyer family, with whom Mrs. Lincoln spent some time following her husband's death, that Abraham sent her ten dollars a month. On one occasion she purchased a shawl and a breast-pin as gifts for the daughters of her niece, Mrs. John Sawyer (the daughter of her sister Hannah Radley). When Abraham was in Charleston for the debate with Douglas in 1858, he gave his mother fifty dollars, according to Chapman. On the occasion of his last visit to her, in January 1861, the biographer Jesse Weik states that he left her "a generous sum of money to lighten the burden of her declining years and thus insure her every comfort."[9]

President Lincoln did not forget his Coles County mother when he was in Washington. He undoubtedly sent her money on occasions of which we have no record, but one recorded instance was in March 1864, when he sent her fifty dollars, in care of her son-in-law Dennis Hanks. Hanks reported to Lincoln: "Dere Abe I received your Letter Check for 50.00 I shoed it to Mother She cried like a child."[10]

Evidently the question of taking care of Mrs. Lincoln was a point of contention between Dennis Hanks and John J. Hall, her grandson. Each criticised the other to Lincoln. On October 18, 1864, Hall wrote to Lincoln that Sarah was not receiving the money he sent her. Hanks and Chapman, according to Hall, were keeping the money. Hall wrote:

Dear Uncle,

This leaves us all well but Grand Mother. She is quite puny. I write to inform you that Grand Mother has not and does not receive one cent of the money you send her Dennis & Chapman keep all the money you send her. She now needs clothing and shoes. They have the money in their Pockett & Uncle Dennis is cussing you all the time and abusing me & and your best friends for supporting you they make you believe they are taking care of her which is not the case. I & my mother are now taking care of her and have for the past four years. If you wish for her to have anything send it by check here to the bank of Charleston, or send none for I tell you upon the honor of a man she does not get it & he Dennis has threatened to put her on the county.

. . . I remain your nephew.

John J. Hall

N. B. I have written you these plain truths by Gran Mothers request She has been asking me to do this for four years—please write soon[11]

How unfortunate that President Lincoln in the midst of the problems and miseries of the war was bothered by this bickering among his stepmother's relatives.

Mrs. Lincoln was living with the Halls at the Goosenest Prairie farm at the time of Lincoln's assassination. Dennis Hanks recalled in 1889 that he brought her the sad news. "'Aunt Sairy,' sez I, 'Abe's dead.' 'Yes, I know Denny. I knowed they'd kill him. I ben awaitin' fur it,' and she never asked no questions. She was getting purty old, an' I reckon she thought she'd like to jine him."[12] Hanks did not mention the presence of Hall, who later gave his own account of the same incident. He remembered that when she got the news of Abraham's death "she jest put her apern over her face and cried out 'Oh my boy Abe; They've killed him. I knowed they would. I knowed they would.' She never had no heart after that to be chirp and peart like she used to be."[13]

In September 1865 Herndon interviewed Mrs. Lincoln. She told him: "I did not want

Abe to run for President, did not want him elected, was afraid somehow or other, felt it in my heart that something would happen to him . . . . Abe and his father are in Heaven, I have no doubt, and I want to go to them, go where they are. God bless Abraham."[14]

Mrs. Lincoln's health was poor during the last few years of her life. In January 1867, Harriet Chapman reported to Herndon that "Grandma is getting very feeble. Since I wrote last [a month earlier] I have visited her and found her quite sick."[15]

Abraham Lincoln's wife and stepmother never met. But a letter to Sarah Lincoln from Mary Todd Lincoln on December 19, 1867, shows that she fully realized her husband's affection for his stepmother. The letter accompanied gifts the younger Mrs. Lincoln was sending to her mother-in-law. She wrote:

Mrs. Sally Lincoln

My dear Madam:

In memory of the dearly beloved one, who always remembered you with so much affection, will you not do me the favor of accepting these few trifles? God has been very merciful to you, in prolonging your life and I trust your health has also been preserved — In

my great agony of mind I can not trust myself to write about, what so entirely fills my thoughts, my darling husband; knowing how well you loved him also, is a greatful satisfaction to me. Believe me, dear madam, if I can ever be of any service to you, in *any* respect, I am entirely at your service . . I will be pleased to learn whether this package was received by you. Perhaps you know that our youngest boy is named for your husband, Thomas Lincoln, this child, the idol of his father — I am blessed in both my sons, they are very good and noble. The oldest is growing very much like his own dear father, I am a deeply afflicted woman, and hope you will pray for me.

I am, my dear Madam affectionately yours Mary Lincoln.[16]

Sarah Lincoln died on April 10, 1869[17] at the old Lincoln farm at Goosenest Prairie, where she had been living with the Halls. She was buried, according to Hall, in a black woolen dress which Abraham had given to her on his last visit to Coles County in 1861.[18] The minister was the Reverend Aaron Lovins of Toledo, Illinois, who had been preaching at the Webster School, a

mile and a half south of the Lincoln farm, where Mrs. Lincoln and the Halls had attended services. Mr. Lovins was a member of the Disciples of Christ.[19] There was a great crowd at the funeral — the largest ever held in the neighborhood according to a later newspaper account. The minister stood at the door of the cabin, with the family seated inside and the neighbors standing outside.[20] She was buried by the side of her husband in the Shiloh cemetry.

Perhaps the finest compliment paid to Sarah Lincoln by the biographers of her son comes from William E. Barton, who in his *The Women Lincoln Loved,* wrote: "Year in and year out, through the period of his late boyhood and young manhood, Abraham Lincoln saw and admired and loved this handsome, curly-haired new mother of his, and he carried into life a finer ideal of womanhood for what he discovered in her."[21]

Sarah Lincoln deserves to be remembered and honored. Where she could have brought bitterness and futility into the life of Abraham Lincoln, she brought affection and inspiration. The quality of warm human kindness so marked in Abraham's character was a reflection in part at least of his happy home life as a boy after Sarah became

his stepmother. The affectionate relationship between Sarah and her adopted family was due to her own motherly affection, shared without difference or distinction with the son of Thomas and her own children. Let us honor Sarah Lincoln, a worthy mother to Nancy Lincoln's boy.

NOTES

1 Information on Bush family and Sarah Bush's two marriages in *The Lincoln Kinsman,* No. 6, December 1938, "Bush Family Documents". Dr. Louis A. Warren, compiler.
2. Statement of September 8, 1865. Herndon-Weik Mss., photostats in Illinois State Historical Library, Nos. 335-342.
3. The same, No. 442.
4. The same, Nos. 335-342.
5. Sandburg: *Lincoln Collector,* pp. 107-108.
6. Thomas J. Malone, "Stepmothered to Greatness", in *American Legion Magazine,* February 1939, p. 3.
7. December 17, 1865. Herndon-Weik photostats, Nos. 458-459.
8. Nicolay and Hay: *Complete Works,* vol. II, pp. 152-153.
9. Weik: *The Real Lincoln,* p. 50.
10. Robert Todd Lincoln Collection, Library of Congress. No. 32134.
11. The same, No. 37368.
12. Atkinson: *The Boyhood of Lincoln,* pp. 54-55.
13. Gridley: *The Story of Abraham Lincoln,* p. 279.
14. Herndon-Weik Mss., Library of Congress. Group IV, No. 2315.
15. Herndon-Weik photostats, No. 1363.
16. Photostat in possession of the writer. Original in files of the Lincoln National Life Foundation, Fort Wayne, Indiana. Also in *Lincoln Lore,* No. 526. Courtesy of Dr. Louis A. Warren.

17. *Herndon's Lincoln* (1930 edition), p. 30. Barton: *The Women Lincoln Loved,* p. 108, and Tarbell: *The Life of Abraham Lincoln,* Vol. III, p. 26 (picture caption), gives the date of her death as December 10, 1869. The county death records of Coles County do not go back to 1869.
18. Gridley: *The Story of Abraham Lincoln,* p. 277.
19. Lerna (Illinois) *Weekly Eagle,* April 17, 1931.
20. Clipping, no date, probably February 1892. Photostat from Abraham Lincoln Association, Springfield, Illinois.
21. Barton: *The Women Lincoln Loved,* p. 91.

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Mrs. Sarah Bush Johnston Lincoln, step-mother of Abraham Lincoln. Picture taken about 1865.

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